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Life of Omar al-Khayyámi

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LIFE OF OMAR AL-KHAYYÁMI

BY

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To

MRS EDWARD SALVESEN

AS A MARK OF SINCERE APPRECIATION AND GRATITUDE

FOR HER MANY KINDNESSES AND UNWAVERING

FRIENDSHIP THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

BY

THE AUTHOR

Preface

IN writing the following Life of Omar al-Khayyami, it has not been my intention to enter the lists against the numerous British, American, and Continental authors who have done so much to popularise the works of the immortal poet-philosopher in the western hemisphere, and to whom, as a Persian, I am deeply grateful. On the contrary, my endeavour has been solely to present the Life of Omar from the Persian standpoint, and give an account of his philosophy as understood by his numerous admirers in his native land.

In addition to the valuable sources of information to be found in the Bodleian Library, the British Museum, the Library of St Petersburg and the *Bibliothèque Royale* of Paris, I have had the privilege of access to certain extremely rare and interesting MSS. of unquestionable authenticity, the property of the Royal House of Persia, and of private persons, noblemen, and heads of religious houses, to whom they have

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been handed down as heirlooms. Thanks to religious prejudice, all or most of these are practically inaccessible to Europeans, many of them being regarded as objects of veneration which it were sacrilege to submit to the eye of an infidel. As will be seen in the following chapters, the conclusions to be drawn from a careful study of these MSS. differ considerably in certain important respects from the opinions commonly accepted by Western students of Omar and his works.

My sincere thanks are due to Mrs E. Logan Calder, to whom I am indebted for many valuable suggestions, and for her kindness in revising my English MS. ; also to Prof. E. G. Browne of Cambridge, from whose admirable translation of *Chabar Magala* I have made several quotations.

J. K. M. SHIRAZI.

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Chapter One : His Birthplace



N the early development of Persian literature, science, and commerce, and in the political and religious changes of the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries, the province of Khorassan

and its capital Nishapur played a highly important rôle. As a preliminary to the intelligent study of the life of Omar al-Khayyámi, better known to English readers as Omar Khayyám, it may be interesting and indeed necessary to give a brief historical sketch of the past and present importance to Persia of a province and a city which were at the zenith of their glory while as yet the continent of Europe was plunged in

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the religious and intellectual darkness of the Middle Ages.

The province of Khorassan is situated in north-eastern Persia. To the north is Russian Turkestan; to the east the western frontier of Afghanistan. On the south and west lie the Persian provinces of Kerman, Semnan, and Damghan. The name Khorassan signifies Land of the Sun, a description amply justified by the climate, which is delightfully warm and sunny. So genial is the atmosphere, so perennial the sunshine, that Khorassanis can scarcely endure the climate even of other parts of Persia, and in the colder regions of the north-west are seldom or never met with.

Geographically, Khorassan is classified as a tropical country, and is rich in characteristic flora and fauna. Thanks to the climatic conditions, the soil is highly suitable for agriculture, though at present there is but little land under cultivation. What there is, however, amply proves the richness of the soil, which, were it in the hands of Western agriculturists, would be capable of yielding a rich return.

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In early times agriculture flourished to a much greater extent, witness the numerous artificially diverted streams and the remains of well-constructed canals for irrigation purposes which remain to the present day. During the Middle Ages cotton was grown on an extensive scale, and played an important part in the industry and commerce of the district. From the looms of Khorassan came fine woollen, silk, and cotton woven goods, the best obtainable in the markets of the mediæval world. Weaving is to this day the characteristic handicraft of the province, and the finest carpets, shawls, saddle-cloths, saddle-bags, and woven articles of all descriptions are produced now as in the Middle Ages in a perfection unrivalled elsewhere throughout Persia.

In addition to the wealth to be derived from the manufacture of textile fabrics, Khorassan was and is possessed of considerable mineral resources. In early times the finest turquoises in the world came from the mines of Rubat Zafaruni in northern Khorassan, in due course to adorn the fingers of Persian nobles and

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Caliphs of Baghdad, or find a place among the most treasured jewels of Western wealth and beauty. In like manner also the exquisite shawls and carpets of Khorassan did not remain exclusively to decorate the dwellings of the Persian nobility, but during the tenth century found their way into the mosques of Cordova and the Christian churches throughout Europe. In short, the name Khorassan was better known in Europe then than it is to-day, and its artistic productions were perhaps more highly appreciated than they are in an age whose taste has been vitiated by cheap machine-made reproductions.

It is the custom among many cultured persons in Europe, some of whom, as students of Persian literature, ought to know better, to speak of the inhabitants of Khorassan as uneducated and semi-barbaric. Such statements can only be regarded as the outcome of imperfect knowledge. Any one who has mixed with the Persian educated classes, any one who has made himself familiar with the Persian language, religion, and sentiment, must admit that the

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civilisation and culture of Persia in general and of Khorassan in particular, if different in kind from the civilisation and culture of the West, is yet of a degree to command respect and even admiration. And if so much may be said to-day, the like is even more true regarding the condition of affairs in the ninth and tenth centuries, when Persia, though in the throes of political and religious changes, retained and developed its ancient civilisation undisturbed, while as yet all that is meant by Western civilisation had scarcely begun to emerge from the chaos consequent upon the break-up of the Roman Empire. As we shall see later, learning flourished throughout Persia during the Middle Ages, and Nishapur was the seat of several well-known schools and colleges.

But it was through its commerce that the province of Khorassan first rose to that position of supremacy which during the eleventh century caused it to be regarded as the pearl of the Persian crown. Its commercial relations extended to Afghanistan, Baluchistan, India, and Turkestan, and by degrees it came to be

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acknowledged as the richest province in the Persian Empire. Nishapur, the capital, is situated in the north, some forty miles from the famous turquoise-mines of Rūbat Zafaruni, to which we have already had occasion to refer. The city is supposed to have been built by Tahmuraz¹ of the Pishdadyan dynasty, and there can be no doubt that it is one of the oldest cities in Persia. More than once it has been destroyed by earthquakes, and met with disaster at the hands of invading Seljuks and Turcomans, to whom invasion was easy across the frontier of what is now known as Russian Turkestan.

Alike in ancient and in modern times Nishapur enjoyed a high reputation as a place of residence. Its outskirts abound with beautiful gardens and shady orchards, flushed in spring with the glory of pear and peach, apple and almond blossom, and in autumn ruddy with the deeper glow of ripening fruit. The air is heavy with the scent of jasmine

¹ According to Persian historians, this king was the third or fourth in direct succession from Noah.

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and lily, the tulip flaunts in multi-coloured magnificence of hue, and everywhere the rose—the rose of the poets—flings abroad the perfection of her fragrance and colour in a riot of wanton profusion. Arab and Persian historians agree in celebrating the greatness of the city and the beauty of its surroundings. Poets in every age have loved to linger over the mysterious loveliness of its dark-eyed maids, the sensuous enchantment of its rose-gardens, the wisdom and learning and fame of its scholars—hymning their praises in countless odes and lyrics, rich with all the luxuriant imagery of the East. Allowance must be made for the extravagances of the poetic imagination. In these latter days too, perchance something of the glamour has passed away. But when all is said and done, enough still remains to prove that Nishapur in the hey-day of its splendour well deserved its fame as the home of beauty, the cradle of genius, the first and fairest city of the Persian Empire, and the third or fourth city in the world during the Middle Ages. Among other substantial

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advantages enjoyed by Nishapur, we have it on eminent authority that the city was the seat of some six or eight colleges or schools of learning, all or any of which might compare not unfavourably with the university-colleges of modern Western countries. Here theology (Mohammedan), science, and philosophy were taught by the ablest and most learned scholars of the age, and hither flocked young noblemen and the sons of the wealthier classes from all parts of Persia, in the pursuit of various studies. If only as a seat of learning therefore, Nishapur was easily the first city in mediæval Persia, a distinction probably due to some extent to the influence of the progressive methods of education prevailing in Baghddad under the Caliphs, who during a considerable period exercised a nominal power over the province of Khorassan.

Commercially, likewise, Nishapur was far and away the most important city in the region, thanks to its situation on the direct caravan route to Afghanistan and India. Hundreds of caravans laden with valuable consignments arrived daily from the various commercial

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centres of the time, and hundreds daily took their departure, bearing with them the finest productions of the Nishapur looms, to spread the fame of the city far and wide throughout the world.

Nor does Nishapur figure less prominently in political history. During the latter half of the tenth and the opening decades of the eleventh centuries Khorassan was under the sway of the Ghaznavid dynasty, whose conquests extended to Samarkand on the north, over all modern Afghanistan and India on the east, and as far as Kurdistan and the Caspian on the west. During the reign of the last Ghaznavid king, Mahmoud, the Turks made their appearance under the leadership of their chief Seljuk. Encouraged by their conquest of Samarkand and Bokhara, they turned their attention to Khorassan, on the borders of which they settled and adopted a very threatening attitude towards its ruler. Presently they began to harry the borderland, until Mahmoud, whose patience was exhausted, organised an expedition against them. In the course of the

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expedition Mahmoud died, and Seljuk was able successfully to overrun all Khorassan. But Seljuk did not long survive his numerous triumphs. He was succeeded by his sons Mikhayil Ibn Daoud and Toghrul Bey, of whom the former assumed the sway of Khorassan. Toghrul, having conquered all Persia, proceeded on an expedition against Baghdad, which he succeeded in entering, and had the temerity to proclaim himself Sultan, notwithstanding the presence in the province of some of the most powerful Caliphs. Naturally, the Caliphs were highly incensed at the insult thus put upon them, but Toghrul was able to gain the approval of at least a certain section by his marriage with the daughter of one of their number. Like Seljuk, Toghrul Bey did not long survive his victories, and his brother Mikhayil also dying, was succeeded by the Sultan Alp Arslan, during whose reign the province of Khorassan flourished exceedingly. Alp Arslan in his turn was succeeded by the Sultan Malik Shah, the best ruler in Persia of the Seljuk dynasty. He was a liberal patron

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of the arts and sciences, and did much to further the cause of education throughout his realm. With the reign of his successor, Sultan Sanjar, a ruler of entirely opposite temperament and tastes, the Seljuk dynasty came to an end in the early part of the twelfth century.

The period covering the rise and fall of these two dynasties, the Ghaznavid and the Seljuk, extending as it does over a period of three centuries, witnessed many changes in the religious, intellectual, and social conditions of Khorassan, consequent upon the political movements of the time. The Seljuks, having embraced Mohammedanism, became imbued with all the fanatical zeal of the religious convert, and determined to force their own mode of thought upon their Persian subjects. By nature the Persian is somewhat of a free-thinker, and it was not without considerable resistance on the part of individuals that the mass of the population was compelled to abandon the modes of thought they had cherished for centuries and adapt themselves to the more rigid tenets of the Mohammedan faith.

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On the other hand the learned men who, on the conquest of Baghdad, found their way into Khorassan, were welcomed with open arms. Arab astronomers, metaphysicians, and mathematicians flocked to Nishapur as the capital of the Seljuk Empire, and have left their mark on the science and literature of the age, at the same time perceptibly and permanently affecting the current of popular ideas.

For a long period of subsequent history Khorassan continues to hold its own as a centre of learning and commerce, but politically its development is arrested. To-day its place in Persian politics is comparatively insignificant, though its commercial supremacy remains unimpaired. Its turquoise-mines have not yet been exhausted but are still equal to the demand in the markets of the world for the beautiful and precious stone. Its exports of wool and cotton are extremely valuable, immense quantities of the raw material annually passing by way of the Caspian Sea into the interior of Russia, where it invariably commands the highest prices. Even more sought after are

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the artistic productions of the Khorassan looms. Who has not heard of the beautiful hand-woven Khorassan shawls? Who has not seen and longed to possess the magnificent carpets of silk or wool, many of them destined to furnish the palaces of kings and emperors or the no less sumptuous mansions of American millionaires?

All this notwithstanding, from Khorassan the glory has departed. Politically, as has been said, it can no longer take a place in the first rank. Its claim, too, to intellectual supremacy must be abandoned. The fame of its former seats of learning has become dimmed. Its schools no more attract the wise men of East and West, nor does its youth flock to seek wisdom at the ancient shrines. By this it must not be understood that the modern Khorassanis are totally lacking in culture or indifferent to education. On the contrary, they are the most well-informed and agreeable people in Persia. Their manners are the most charming, their speech the most musical in the land, the latter abounding in flowery tropes and delicate

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imagery, not unworthy to grace the dainty lyrics of Khaja Hafiz of Shiraz.

Such are the people of Khorassan to-day, and such the condition of the land in which they dwell. As for Nishapur, its history is but a single chapter in that of the province of which it is the capital. There is nothing in the modern city with its buildings of mud or brick to recall "the golden prime" of the eleventh century. Only a few ruins remain to hint the architectural splendours of the past and bear witness to the culture, the refinement, the love of art of which Nishapur was formerly the centre. But it still retains its importance as the leading emporium of commerce and the most frequented city in modern Persia, a position it is likely to enjoy as long as through it passes the caravan route to the so-called "holy city" of Mashad.¹

The mean and ruinous condition of

¹ This town is situated to the NE. of Nishapur. It contains the shrine of the famous Sheik Imam Riza, who was killed by Imam Maimun. His tomb is considered sacred, and thousands of the Faithful from all parts of Persia make it the object of an annual pilgrimage. No Christian is allowed to visit the shrine under any circumstances.

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Nishapur is largely accounted for by its stormy history. Down to comparatively recent times the city has never known what it was to have several years' continuous peace. For a lengthy period it was constantly subjected to savage invasions on the part of the Turcomans, who, in accordance with the tactics characteristic of nomadic tribes, regularly crossed the frontier to ravage the adjacent districts and terrorise the inhabitants. Then, their lust of rapine and pillage satisfied for the time being, they withdrew to their own territory, only to reappear the following year and resume the work of havoc and bloodshed. Thanks to energetic measures on the part of the British and Persian governments acting in concert, these raids were finally put a stop to some forty years ago, and Nishapur was left to resume the even tenor of its way.¹

A better idea of the ancient glories of

¹ Turcomans have always been very troublesome in this part of Khorassan, their invasions dating as far back as the time of Sultan Murad Mirza, Governor of Khorassan from 1840. He was the son of the illustrious Abbas Mirza and great-uncle of the present Muzaffar Eddin Shah.

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Nishapur is to be gleaned from its environs. The city is still girdled with orchards and gardens of unrivalled loveliness, glorious with a tropical luxuriance of flower and fruit and musical with the song of the nightingale. Here as of yore the Nishapuri takes his ease beneath the canopy of a cloudless sky, blue as the turquoise of the Persian mines. Here in the shade of the trees that shed their petalled sweetness at his feet he sips his snow-cooled sherbet, or smokes the fragrant *kalyan*, and forgets the cares of this “perishable” world as he listens to the sweet but melancholy voice of the Persian musician singing the songs of other days. Here, too, the maidens gather as of old in all the witchery of their dark-eyed loveliness and thrill responsive to the love notes of the nightingale, or tune their beloved “tars,”¹ themselves to sing of love and roses.

What if this city of love and roses and—decay be no longer the magnet of the learned world? What if to sage and scholar have succeeded

¹ A musical instrument not unlike the guitar.

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the merchant merely and the pilgrim? Has it not still the right to pride itself upon its faded laurels and claim the homage of the West as the cradle of Eastern genius—the birthplace of Omar?



Chapter Two: His Birth and Parentage



OMEWHERE amid the enchanted rose-gardens of Nishapur, towards the beginning of the eleventh century of the Christian era, was born Ghiyas Uddin Abul Fath

Omar Ibn Ibrahim al - Khayyámi, the astronomer-poet of Persia.

Some writers hold that Omar was a native not of Nishapur but of Basang in the district of Astarabad, and that his parents belonged to the village of Shamshad in the province of Balkh.¹ This statement is first met with in the writings of Muhammad ad Shahrazuri, who, in

¹ See Tariki Alf in this connection.

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justice be it said, does not himself seem to attach much importance to it. "Some say," he writes, that Omar was born in Basang. The expression is in Persian the equivalent of the French *on dit*, and merely voices a current rumour worthy of note as differing from the accepted view rather than as a piece of authentic information.

With a view to the elucidation of this point I have been at the pains to institute investigations among MSS. existing in the libraries of private persons in Persia, but without eliciting anything in the nature of corroborative evidence. Rather, all the evidence is on the side of the commonly accepted view that Omar was a native of Nishapur. Moreover, as the result of personal inquiries in Basang and its neighbourhood, it was found that no local tradition associates the name of Omar with the district, nor can any documentary evidence be discovered even remotely hinting at such a possibility.

There would thus seem to be no reason to doubt the assertion of the majority of Persian biographers, who agree in referring to Omar

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as a "Nishapuri," *i.e.* a native of Nishapur. Here the poet was educated; here he passed almost the whole of his long life, bound as one might suppose by early associations and family ties; and here we find his tomb, in itself a sufficient proof of the identity of his birthplace, the Persian custom in Omar's day as in ours being to bury the dead in the place of their nativity.

The birth of Omar is usually spoken of, roughly, as occurring somewhere about the middle of the eleventh century. I am myself inclined to place it somewhat earlier. Little of a definite nature can be gathered on the subject from the MSS. accessible in European libraries; but a friend of my own in Persia has in his possession a MS.¹ of the thirteenth century dealing with the lives of various poets, among others that of Omar Khayyám. Here we find it noted that Omar lived to a great age, being over one hundred years old at the time of his death. This statement is corroborated by the

¹ The MS. in question is the property of Hadji Mirza Mahmoud Shirazi of Zanzan and Tabriz.

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wasiyah or last will and testament of Hassan Ibn Ali Ibn Ishak, better known in history as the Nizam-ul-Mulk.¹ This document is given *in extenso* by the historian Amir Khawand, or Mirkhond, to quote the name more familiar to Western students. It partakes of the nature of an autobiography rather than of a will in the modern sense, and affords interesting glimpses not only of the life of Hassan but of his contemporaries or of such of them as were brought into intimate personal relations with him. Thus we learn that the father of the Nizam-ul-Mulk was a wealthy landowner of Tus, well able to afford his son a liberal education. With this object in view the youthful Nizam-ul-Mulk, in accordance with the custom of the age, was sent all the way from Tus to Nishapur, there to sit at the feet of the learned Imam Mowaffik,² whose fame as a teacher was known throughout the Eastern world. Such was his reputation that, if we are to believe the Nizam-

¹ This title was conferred upon Hassan by the Sultan Alp Arslan, and means "controller of the kingdom."

² Properly written and pronounced Mowaffiküddin. "Imam" signifies teacher.

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ul-Mulk, to have studied under Mowaffik was in itself a certain passport to a successful career.

As a wealthy youth of good social position Nizam-ul-Mulk had the *entrée* to the best, that is to say the most intellectual and cultured society of his time, and found no difficulty in obtaining admission to the first college or school in Nishapur, that, namely, presided over by the Imam Mowaffik. A considerable intimacy sprang up between Nizam-ul-Mulk and Mowaffik, based on admiration for a revered teacher on the one hand, and the natural liking of a professor for a promising and enthusiastic student on the other.

Nizam-ul-Mulk soon made friends also among the youth of Nishapur. Of his fellow-students two in particular were singled out for special intimacy—Hassan Ibn Ali Ibn Sabbah and Ghiyas Uddin Abul Fath Omar Ibn Ibrahim al-Khayyámi. Hassan Ibn Sabbah, we are informed, was the son of a person of good position but doubtful reputation, residing in Arakistan in south-western Persia. Of Omar's station in life nothing is said, but finding him thus taking his place as a matter of course

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among the well-to-do students of the best school of his time, we are justified in supposing that his social position was at least equal to theirs. Nor is any direct allusion made to Omar's origin and birthplace. But we learn that Nizam-ul-Mulk and Hassan met Omar at Nishapur, and in view of the particulars Nizam-ul-Mulk is careful to give concerning others, his very omission to specify the place of Omar's nativity is in itself an argument in favour of the supposition that his home and parents were in Nishapur, and that he was, accordingly, native born.

The narrative of Nizam-ul-Mulk affords many pleasing glimpses of Persian student life in the eleventh century, and of the intimacy existing between himself and his two friends, of whose qualities and attainments he invariably speaks with generous praise. Like students of to-day, they seem to have indulged in speculations concerning all things in heaven and earth, and settled categorically many esoteric questions older heads are content to let alone. We even see the trio leaving the lecture-hall together, dis-

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cussing and criticising with boyish eagerness the lecture to which they have just listened, as they pass along the busy streets or shady by-ways.

In order to set a seal upon their friendship the three friends entered into a somewhat remarkable bond, which was to bear ample fruit in after years. The idea was Hassan's—the "vile" Hassan¹ as he was afterwards to be stigmatised. Even as a youth Hassan appears to have been selfish and scheming, qualities which in later life were to develop into treachery and wickedness of the deepest dye. Coming to Nizam-ul-Mulk and Omar one day as they sat chatting together, Hassan reminded them of the saying that to the pupil of Mowaffik success in life was an assured thing. They were all three certain to prosper more or less, but in case one of them should get ahead of the others he was to bind himself to do all in his power for the advancement of his friends,

¹ Hassan was the founder and head of the secret Mohammedan sect of the Assassins, a fanatical branch of the Ismailis. Their characteristic doctrine—the employment of secret assassination against all enemies—was a natural corollary of the fundamental Ismailian dogma that all actions are morally indifferent.

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to the extent even of sharing with them his wealth and honours. The proposal met with the approval of the others, and a compact was entered into accordingly, with all the enthusiasm of youthful ardour.

In course of time, each of the young men having taken his degree,¹ they separated, each to enter upon the occupation which was to constitute his career in life. Nizam-ul-Mulk, having taken an exceptionally high position in his college, was invited by the Seljuk Prince Mikhayil Ibn Daoud to undertake the education of his son and heir, Alp Arslan. Such was the veneration and esteem with which Nizam-ul-Mulk inspired his royal pupil on account of his learning and many estimable qualities, that, on succeeding to the Seljuk throne, Alp Arslan offered Nizam-ul-Mulk the post of Vizier.

¹ The prescribed course of study then as now included the Koran, the Arabic and Persian language and literature, grammar, theology (Mohammedan), and selections from various poets and prose writers. Students also received instructions in such pursuits as horse-riding and military tactics, and in certain games and pastimes, notably the "Mazu," a game practically the same as the modern golf. Devotees of "the royal game" may be interested to learn that like polo it derives its origin from the East.

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This position he filled with the highest honour, establishing schools out of the State funds in many parts of Persia, encouraging art and education, and proving himself in every respect an administrator of sterling worth and ability.¹

In the midst of his many occupations and interests Nizam-ul-Mulk did not forget former friends. On the strength of the old compact, Omar, who all this time appears to have been engaged in quietly prosecuting the mathematical and astronomical studies for which he afterwards became justly celebrated, made application to the Vizier, as the most conspicuously successful of the three friends, for the assistance he had promised, and was at once offered an official position under the government. But the stress and strain of office were little to the taste of a philosopher and student like Omar, with whom ample leisure ranked before everything. The post was therefore respectfully declined, and a government annuity of 1200 gold pieces (£800), to be paid out of the revenues of Nishapur, was substituted. This arrangement satisfactorily

¹ *Conf.* Ibn Khalikan and the poet Al Bakri.

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concluded, Omar took leave of the Court and returned to Nishapur, well pleased to resume his life of scholarly research and speculation.

Meanwhile Hassan, too, had bethought himself of the bond, and determined to see what benefit was to be derived from so powerful a friend at Court as the Nizam-ul-Mulk. The latter, it would appear, had had reason to discover that Hassan the man had developed into something very different from Hassan the youthful companion of his college days, and his friendship for him had sensibly cooled. Still he saw no reason to repudiate his oath, and in response to Hassan's solicitations installed him in a government post of considerable responsibility. With power and opportunity, Hassan's evil propensities developed apace. With a view to supplanting the Vizier in the Sultan's favour, he became entangled in various Court intrigues. But his treachery was discovered, and he was on the point of being disgraced and punished, when just in time he made his escape to join the sect of the Ismailis and figure notoriously in history as the founder

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of the Hassaniyehs or Assassins. Among the victims of this atrocious brotherhood was the good Nizam, who perished at the hands of the agents employed by his early friend.

As the spontaneous testimony of a personal friend and contemporary, the *vasiyah* of Nizam-ul-Mulk, whose contents, as far as they bear upon the life of Omar, we have thus summarised, is a document of incalculable importance to the student. Written as it was by a man of high rank and acknowledged integrity, with no other object beyond that of chronicling the incidents of a busy and eventful life, it is impossible to believe that he set down anything concerning his friend but what he knew to be absolutely true. And in reading between the lines, as one is naturally tempted to do, the inferences to be drawn are extremely simple and surely not unjustifiable.

As already pointed out, since Nizam-ul-Mulk is always careful to specify the origin and birthplace of those with whom he came in contact, there is good reason to infer, from his omitting to do so in the case of Omar, that the

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latter had no other association in the writer's mind than with the place in which he first made his acquaintance, and where they spent their college days together. To the Nizam, Omar was but a part of his *alma mater*, and needed no further introduction to identify his personality or commend him to his readers.

On the subject of Omar's age, Nizam-ul-Mulk's testimony is quite explicit. Omar, he says, and his other friend Hassan, were "of the same age" as himself. Now we know that Nizam-ul-Mulk was born in 1018 A.D. Allowing, therefore, for a few years' margin either way, we should be safe to say that Omar was born between 1015 and 1020 A.D. His death is known to have taken place in 1123 or 1124 A.D., so that at the lowest computation he must when he died have been something over a hundred years old. This corresponds with the statement contained in the thirteenth-century MS. in my friend's possession, and, as I have discovered by personal inquiry, is the view generally accepted by Persian scholars of the present day. It

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would seem that Persian poets are a long-lived race on the whole, several of the most eminent having attained an age as great as that now claimed for Omar.

But while grateful to the Nizam for having told us so much, one cannot help regretting that he has not told us more, especially as regards the interesting question of Omar's name and parentage. Up to the present it has been pretty generally accepted that Omar was of purely Persian descent, European authors either taking his origin for granted or refusing to enter into complicated questions of family history. My contention is that Omar, though a native of Persia, was not of Persian origin but belonged to an Arab tribe, al-Khayyámi, a name which is commonly used as his surname and has given rise to the legend that his father and even the poet himself followed the trade of tent-making. Now, except in conjunction with that of Omar the poet, the name occurs nowhere in Persian MSS., and the best authorities are agreed that neither in ancient nor in modern Persia does the

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name al-Khayyāmi exist as a patronymic. Among Arabs, on the other hand, the name is fairly common, as also among the nomadic tribes of Khuzistan and Luristan.

How it should have come about that Omar's family, though of Arab descent, should be living in Nishapur as domiciled Persian citizens is a matter not difficult of explanation. Under the rule of the Caliphs, while as yet law and religion were in an unsettled condition and subject to frequent revolution, there were many nomadic tribes who preferred to withdraw themselves as far as possible from the central authority at Baghdad, rather than endure persecution at the hands of religious fanatics to whose views they were indifferent rather than hostile, or suffer themselves to be drawn into wars between rival claimants to the Caliphate, in whose success or failure they were equally uninterested. Moreover, as in Corsica to-day or in Scotland a few centuries ago, the custom of *vendetta* prevailed, and blood-feuds raged between rival tribe and tribe that ended only with the annihilation of one of them. For one reason or another there

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were thus always numerous individuals or bands of individuals to whom it was convenient to seek sanctuary in a distant province, where not infrequently they settled down and were lost among the peaceful inhabitants. For such as these Khorassan was a favourite place of refuge, thanks to its distance from the capital of the Caliphate and to the many advantages as a place of residence with which it was endowed by nature and circumstance.

Early in the ninth or tenth century there is supposed to have existed an Arab tribe called *al-Khayyámis* (tent-makers), just as to-day we have *al-Shakakis* (giants). To this tribe the ancestors of Omar probably belonged, and doubtless had good reasons of their own for migrating to Khorassan, where the power of the Caliphs was merely nominal, and ample opportunities existed for gaining a peaceful livelihood. Not for one moment do I mean to imply that the al-Khayyámis had other and less creditable reasons for quitting their native land than such as sprang out of political or religious dissent. Some schism among the Faithful, some despotic order

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on the part of a Caliph was quite enough to stir the passions and rouse the pride of these haughty followers of Islam, and drive them forth in search of that freedom of thought and unbridled liberty of action to which they were heirs in virtue of their very name. There are many families in Persia to-day, Persian of the Persians, who yet pride themselves on their Arab descent and cherish the tradition of distant ancestors who were content to resign home and country and the habits of generations in search of religious and political liberty. A familiar parallel is afforded by the descendants of the numerous Huguenot families who fled from France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes and sought refuge in England, where to-day little remains to indicate their origin except their names, and even these have frequently been anglicised beyond recognition.

In speaking of the Arabs a distinction is to be drawn between the nomadic or rural Arabs and the Arabs of the towns. To dwellers in cities such as Baghdad, where the Caliph exercised despotic sway alike in ecclesiastical and in

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political affairs, there was little liberty of religious discussion and small opportunity of evading an edict, however fanatic or tyrannical it might be. The Arab of the city, therefore, found it to his advantage to render a blind obedience to the dictates of church and state, and devoted his energies to the pursuit of science and philosophy, to chronicling contemporary history, or to elaborating ingenious commentaries on the pronouncements of this or that Caliph upon knotty points of Mohammedan dogma. He was learned, polished, acute, law-abiding, accustomed to luxurious and refined surroundings, a punctilious adherent of religious observances. In contrast to this the nomadic Arab was the untrammelled child of nature, frank of speech, free of thought, within certain well-defined limits a law unto himself, and a perfervid believer in the letter of the Koran. Freedom was his birthright together with his fine physique and simple mode of life. He was as little able to brook interference as from his inability to organise he was powerless to resist it, and his policy was accordingly less one of

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resistance than of evasion. At the slightest hint of undue interference with his civil or religious liberties he was ready on the shortest notice to lift his tents and "silently steal away."

It was doubtless some attempt to curtail their rights in one respect or the other that induced the al-Khayyamis, these tent-dwelling ancestors of Omar, to quit the broad plains and boundless deserts of Arabia and seek the fertile fields of far Khorassan. There many exiles like themselves were already established; there they were certain of finding friends of kindred race and kindred sympathies; there eventually they settled down, forsook their tents, forgot their nomadic habits, and betook themselves to peaceful occupations. That by-and-by some of them should have found their way to Nishapur was natural enough. As the capital of the province and one of the most important cities in Persia, it afforded unrivalled opportunities of education, of lucrative trading, of meeting fresh arrivals from Arabia in the great caravans daily entering the city, and of gathering from these the latest news of what

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for generations they must have regarded as "home."

All the Persian biographers are curiously silent on the subject of Omar's antecedents and kindred, from which it seems probable that his family did not court publicity, but were content to follow their daily avocations with diligence, and preferred minding their own business to figuring in matters civic or political and so becoming a target for civil and religious enemies. That their fortunes prospered is evident, since, as has already been pointed out, they were able to place their son at the best and most costly college of the time under conditions that admitted of his mingling on equal terms with companions known to be wealthy and of good family.

But while it seems fair to argue that the parents of Omar were in tolerably comfortable circumstances, it must not be too hastily inferred that they were what might be considered rich. To any one acquainted with the rules of Persian hospitality it seems almost inexplicable that no mention is made, even by such an intimate

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friend as Nizam-ul-Mulk, of his ever having been present at any entertainment in Omar's home or of his having come into personal contact with any member of Omar's family. Again, it seems strange that in later years Omar did not hesitate to accept a handsome pension at the hands of the Vizier, though, lest any of Omar's admirers should be shocked to discover that he was wanting in proper pride, it is to be remembered that the money came out of the revenues of Nishapur and not out of the Vizier's private purse.

Both these circumstances may be accounted for, I think, if we assume that the income of Omar's parents, while sufficient for comfort, by no means assured them of affluence, and whatever their means might be they neither admitted of their son's indulging in lavish hospitality nor of providing him with a competence sufficient to render him independent. In short, had there been any special circumstances either of poverty or riches connected with Omar's early life, it is more than likely that we should have heard of them, if not from one of his bio-

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graphers, then certainly from an intimate associate like his college friend, the prospective Nizam-ul-Mulk.

It still remains to consider what was the occupation of Omar's family, if occupation they had, by the time Omar made his appearance in the world. By a not unnatural sequence of ideas most translators of Omar, arguing from the meaning of the words *al-Khayyámi*, have assumed that Ibrahim, the father of Omar, was a tent-maker. Some have even gone the length of asserting that the poet himself followed the same trade. From the Persian point of view this is much the same as arguing that because a man happens to be called Smith it necessarily follows that he or his father must have been a worker in metals. As we have already explained, *al-Khayyámi* is a tribal name, and is not known in Persia as a patronymic.

Moreover, in Nishapur in the eleventh century the chances were all against any one following the occupation of tent-maker, much less of apprenticing his son to it. Khorassan,

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it is always to be borne in mind, was the richest and most advanced province in Persia, and had attained to a high degree of civilisation. Art and architecture flourished, and the ruins that have come down to us tell of a people of large conceptions and refined taste. Far from being dwellers in tents, the population as a whole occupied houses of burnt brick or stone of the usual style of oriental domestic architecture. It is true that certain nomadic tribes inhabited the region to the north of Khorassan, but even supposing that these did not supply their own wants in the matter of tents, the satisfaction of their small requirements could not have made the trade of tent-making a very lucrative one. Certainly it is difficult to see how any member of such a trade could have been in a position to place his son in the college of Nishapur under a teacher like Imam Mowaffik. In ancient as in modern Persia, it was the custom at all schools to charge a certain scale of fees, the proceeds going towards the salaries of the teachers and the upkeep of the mosques with which the schools were commonly associated.

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In the eleventh century, the purchasing power of money being small, the fees charged by an Imam of the outstanding eminence of Mowaffik would have been altogether beyond the reach of any but persons in comfortable circumstances. Nor in a land of aristocratic prejudices like Persia would the social position of such a person have warranted his seeking admission to such a school, and if admitted we can scarcely imagine that we should find him on such terms of intimacy with his social superiors as was Omar with the Nizam-ul-Mulk and Hassan Ibn Sabbah.

All things considered, the conclusion seems justifiable that Omar's father was a man of recognised standing and in easy circumstances, independent possibly of any profession. If he had his own reasons for leading a quiet and retired life it does not follow that he was without ambition for his son, and he was at least determined that the latter should begin his career equipped with all the advantages to be derived from the best education the times could afford.

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To sum up the points on which I see reason to differ from the commonly accepted biographies of Omar. He was born not later than 1015 A.D. or 1020 A.D. He was of Arab and not of Persian descent. The name al-Khayyami, by which he is generally known, is a generic and not a family name. Finally, he was not a tent-maker nor the son of a tent-maker, but of a man of considerable substance, who for religious or other reasons found it advisable to live in comparative retirement, or at anyrate not to assume the social prominence to which otherwise he might have been entitled.



Chapter Three: The Man of Science



BEFORE embarking on the attempt briefly to trace the career of Omar al-Khayyámí as mathematician and astronomer, let us glance for a moment at the educational

and ecclesiastical conditions by which his intellectual environment was determined.

To the uneducated or half-educated masses of the Persian people in the eleventh century, scholars and men of learning were objects not of veneration merely but of superstitious awe. This attitude of mind was based on the most ignoble motives. The Persian was no more capable than his contemporaries in other lands

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of appreciating the value and dignity of learning, but, thanks to his lively imagination and to the precepts carefully inculcated by a corrupt priesthood, he stood deeply in dread of the power knowledge was supposed to confer on its possessor to work upon the ignorant some grievous injury in mind, body or estate, and he respected it accordingly. This attitude of mind on the part of the populace was sedulously cultivated by the Mohammedan ecclesiastics of the time, who, as exponents of religious wisdom, took advantage of it to exact implicit obedience to the particular tenets they favoured.

The contrast in this respect between the Persian of Mohammedan times and his pagan predecessors is interesting and instructive in the extreme. Prior to the Mohammedan invasion, the Persian, of whatsoever rank or calling, was a man accustomed to take himself seriously. He acted for himself, thought for himself alike in matters religious and political. He was self-reliant and self-respecting, a man of comparatively pure ideals and lofty aims, regarding with loving veneration whatsoever appealed to

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him as the highest, intellectually and morally. Towards the discoveries of science he kept an open mind, unbiassed by religious prejudice. To men of learning or superior talent he paid respectful homage, well content to acknowledge the aristocracy of intellect. If he could not be wise himself he sought for nothing better than to be guided as to the affairs of this life by the wisdom of men of higher understanding and wider culture. Heir to a religion in its beginnings not surpassed or equalled in purity of teaching by any lore outside the Semitic Scriptures, for things concerning the life to come, he was content to consult the Magi or high priests, whom he approached in no spirit of fear or blind obedience, but in terms of mutual love and confidence.

Fortunately for him the aims and ambitions of the Zoroastrian priesthood alike in the earlier and the later developments of their faith, were of a nature totally different from those which characterised the Mohammedan Mullahs. He was not hampered by a thousand petty ordinances of creed and conduct, designed to meet

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every exigency of life, but in reality calculated to suppress all originality of thought and effectually check all possibility of moral and intellectual development. Moreover, in contrast to the usage in Mohammedan times, religious institutions and educational institutions were kept strictly apart. Certain schools existed in connection with the temples for the instruction of priests only. For the rest, education was under the undivided control and supervision of the civil authority with the king at its head, and the teachers were appointed and paid by government. In the schools children were taught reading, writing, music and gymnastics. Conversation was encouraged, and originality of thought diligently fostered. To this end prizes were offered by the teachers and were keenly competed for, the king or his representative coming in person to make the award to the successful competitor. As pupils advanced in age they were introduced to the favourite sciences of the age, mathematics and astronomy, and all the time their mental and physical education was such as to fit them later

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on to be good soldiers. As a result they grew up strong in body and in mind, manly, active, intelligent and patriotic in the last degree. With an army composed from the king to its most insignificant unit of men so trained and so inspired, what wonder that rulers like Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes led their cohorts to victory over the surrounding nations and threatened the power of mighty Greece itself?

With the advent of the Mohammedan era all this was changed. After the Arab invasion the greatest confusion prevailed alike in matters civil and religious. The victorious caliphs and their underlings were thus in a manner compelled to assert their authority in both departments of the state, and, backed as it was by the supreme argument of the sword, they were not long in imposing upon the conquered race a polity and a religion of which perhaps no single principle appealed to them save only that of polygamy. To the doctrine of polygamy as preached by the descendants of the Prophet the lower instincts of the people rose in ready response, and the process of moral and physical

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degradation was begun. Gradually, all thought of resistance died away, and the masses bowed supinely before whatever edicts those in authority chose to dictate.

With this state of affairs the caliphs would appear to have been well content. Blind obedience and strict observance of Mohammedan rites and ceremonies—these were regarded by their alien rulers as constituting the whole duty of a Persian subject. To this end the great mass of the people were left to grow up in utter ignorance, an easy prey to the superstitious horrors instilled into them by a fanatical priesthood. For those who desired better there were the schools associated with the mosques. These existed primarily for the training of priests and for the benefit of any who might be desirous of becoming teachers (Imams) and exponents of the Koran, the sacred writings being the sole basis of instruction. The teachers were for the most part priests or mullahs, and were allowed to teach only such doctrines as were strictly approved of by the ecclesiastical authorities. In direct contrast to the system prevailing in

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ancient Persia, the Mohammedan teacher was encouraged to report any original views to which a pupil might give expression, not in order that the latter might receive commendation and reward, but that the budding heretic might be punished—possibly by expulsion from the school. When it is remembered that such institutions afforded the *only* means of acquiring education the wonder is not that progress was so slow, but that it was possible at all.

As was to be supposed, the above state of affairs was matter for the greatest dissatisfaction among the better classes of the community. No priesthood, however tyrannical, has ever been able entirely to fetter the human mind, and various attempts were made on the part of those of enlightened views to secure for the civil authorities the control of educational matters. But as time went on the civil authorities themselves became more and more identified with the ecclesiastical authorities, and in the time of Omar the two were practically one.

It was then to a seminary conducted on lines

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such as have been described that Omar came as a youth to continue his studies, after having undergone a severe preliminary examination in reading, writing, elementary mathematics, and the Koran. We may suppose him to have been actuated by a genuine thirst for knowledge—pricked, too, by the desire of fame, that

“ . . . Spur, which the clear spirit doth raise
To scorn delights and live laborious days.”

Possibly also he may have been not insensible to that primary incentive to effort, the desire of earning a livelihood. But this motive if it existed at all was subservient to the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake apart from all hope of praise or reward. All his life Omar was a searcher after Truth. As we shall see by and by, he even underwent persecution for its sake. The whole story of his life so far as it is known to us points to the conclusion that in his youth as in his later years he was a devoted worshipper at the shrine of wisdom, and spared no effort in the pursuit of learning.

In the course of five or six years he had mastered all the branches included in the usual

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college curriculum, and, examination papers and diplomas being unknown, had earned the right to the epithet of “learned” with all it might involve of veneration and respect on the part of the ignorant. Then as later his favourite study was astronomy and the allied sciences, instruction in which he received from the learned Imam Mowaffik, though how that astute person was able to reconcile his teaching with the doctrines of the Koran to the satisfaction of the ecclesiastical authorities, it is not for me to say.

As has already been said, the study and exposition of the Koran ranked far above all other branches of learning in the eyes of those who had control of educational matters, and in this also, uncongenial as it may have been to him, Omar took a distinguished place, and even achieved a high reputation. In the *Nuzbat ul Arwab* of Muhammad Shahrazuri, written in the thirteenth century, the following anecdote is told:—

“One day Omar Khayyam, going to see the Vizier Abdul Rezak, he found there Imam Abul Hassan al Ghazali, chief of the Readers of

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the Koran. The Vizier and the learned Imam were discussing certain disputed readings of various passages in the Sacred Book, when Omar entering, the Vizier greeted him with the exclamation, ‘Behold the expert,’ and appealed to him for his opinion. Omar then enumerated the versions of a great number of Readers, all of which he criticised unfavourably, and finished by quoting at length the only one with whom he agreed. Then said Al Ghazali, ‘May God add such men to the number of the learned. Verily I do not believe any of the Readers could have remembered so many, not to speak of the philosophers.’”

Al Ghazali, who was known to his contemporaries as the “proof of Islam,” was a great authority on the theological questions of the time, and his testimony to Omar’s knowledge of the Koran carries with it the utmost weight. Little as the subject may have attracted him, Omar could not any more than others afford to despise theology. It constituted his claim equally to the homage of the wise and great and to the reverence of the poor and ignorant, and was later

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to gain attention for his scientific discoveries. But it was on the latter, as we learn from nearly every Persian MS. dealing with the life of Omar, that his fame in his own day was eventually to rest. Science was his ruling passion—the pursuit of it his consolation and his joy. By the ignorant he was feared as the astrologer, who after some mysterious fashion directed the stars and controlled the fates of men. By the better instructed he was honoured as the astronomer who followed the stars in their courses, and from their movements could predict times and seasons. A quaint tale, illustrative of Omar's reputation in this respect, comes down to us in an ancient Persian MS. :—

“In the winter of the year A.H. 508 (A.D. 1114-15) the king sent a messenger to Merv to the Prime Minister Sadruddin Muhammad bin al Muzaffar (on whom be God's mercy), bidding him tell Khaja Imam Omar to select a favourable time for him to go hunting, such that therein should be no snowy or rainy days. For Khaja Imam Omar was in the minister's company, and used to lodge at his house. So

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the minister sent a message to summon him, and told him what had happened. The Khaja went and looked into the matter for two days, and made a careful choice, and he himself went and superintended the mounting of the king at the auspicious moment. When the king was mounted and had gone but a short distance the sky became overcast with clouds, a wind arose, and snow and mist supervened. All present fell to laughing, and the king desired to turn back. But Khaja Imam (Omar) said: 'Have no anxiety, for this very hour the clouds will clear away, and during these five days there will be not a drop of moisture.' So the king rode on and the clouds opened and during these five days there was no moisture, and no one saw a cloud. But prognostication by stars, though a recognised art, is not to be relied on, and whatever an astrologer predicts he must leave to Fate."¹

Omar's journey to Merv, the scene of the foregoing incident, was by no means the only

¹ From the *Ghahar Makala* of Nizami Aruzi of Samarkand, translated by Professor E. G. Browne of Cambridge.

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long journey which he undertook in the course of his lifetime. After graduating at Nishapur we learn that he travelled to Samarkand, Bokhara, Ispahan, Balkh and elsewhere. Now, in the middle ages, travelling in Persia, as it is to-day, was an expensive luxury, and a journey was seldom or never undertaken for mere pleasure. In the case of Omar there are several good reasons why he should so frequently have quitted Nishapur and betaken himself to the road. First of all doubtless was the desire to increase his knowledge of men and places, coupled with the wish to make the acquaintance of kindred spirits, scholars and students like himself, with whom to exchange the latest ideas in science and philosophy.

But there was more than this. As a graduate of a Mohammedan college Omar was necessarily a student and Reader of the Koran. That he differed from the received opinions of the more orthodox Readers is undoubted, witness the anecdote previously quoted, in which, after giving the various versions of a particular text, he is said to have differed from

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most of them. Such an attitude towards the Sacred Book and the comments of its recognised exponents could scarcely have failed to win him many enemies, and it is therefore highly probable that on more than one occasion Omar found it expedient to effect a change of residence so as to avoid religious persecution. It is even said that he made the pilgrimage to Mecca in order to appease the *odium theologicum* he had roused against himself.

Omar had also to suffer to some extent for his early friendship with the afterwards notorious Hassan as Sabbah. As the founder and head of the sect of the Assassins the name of Hassan came to be execrated by all true believers throughout the length and breadth of the Mohammedan world, and those who knew no better argued though not very plausibly that the friend of his youth, whose heterodoxy in matters of religion was acknowledged, might well be supposed to sympathise with Hassan's atrocious doctrines, since other heresies found favour in his eyes.

One fact is certain, that, from whatever cause,

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for a considerable portion of his life Omar was doomed to have no abiding city, but was compelled to move from place to place, from province to province, in each practising his profession of astronomy and astrology for as long as his religious and political enemies would permit. It was only when he achieved complete independence through the munificence of his friend the Nizam-ul-Mulk that he was able to settle down in his beloved Nishapur, and pursue the even tenor of his way in an atmosphere of philosophic calm.

There is a certain amount of evidence to show that, like many another scholar of his day, Omar united with his other scientific pursuits the study of the art of medicine, and even achieved a considerable reputation as a healer. A story is told that while Sultan Sanjar as a child was suffering from smallpox, Omar was called in to see him. On leaving, he was questioned by the Vizier, who asked what was his opinion of the patient's condition. To this Omar replied that he inclined to take a very serious view of the case. A servant who was

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standing by overheard the conversation and very inconsiderately reported it to the Sultan. The patient eventually recovered from his illness, but not from the disagreeable effect produced by the servant's tittle-tattle, as a consequence of which he conceived a violent prejudice against Omar, and was ever afterwards on unfriendly terms with him.¹

Anecdotes are not wanting to prove the reputation Omar had won for himself in other directions. The following is a further extract from the *Nuzbat ul Arwab*: "Omar Khayyám was a Nishapuri by birth and extraction. He was the equal of Abu Ali (Avicenna) in various philosophical sciences, but he was a bad (*i.e.* unorthodox) man, and few men visited him. Once in Ispahan, having perused a book seven times, he was able to repeat it by heart, and on his return to Nishapur dictated it from memory. On comparing this writing with the original, very little difference was found. But he did not like either writing (composition) or teaching. He

¹ *Conf.* The *Nuzbat ul Arwab* of Muhammad Shahrâzuri.

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is the author of a book on natural science, one on Existence and one on Duty, and he was learned in law, history and languages. He had mastered both mathematical and philosophical sciences," Shahrazuri goes on to say, after narrating the incident quoted above in illustration of Omar's reputation as a physician.

"One day Ghazali, the 'proof of Islam,' came to him (Omar) and asked him the method of distinguishing one part of a sphere revolving on its axis from any other part of the sphere. Omar Khayyam began to explain and spoke briefly concerning the laws of motion, but soon refrained from the discussion as was the habit of this respected old man. The conversation was interrupted by the call to midday prayer, whereupon Ghazali explained: 'Behold, truth has entered in and lying has departed.'"

Shahrazuri testifies further that "Omar wrote beautiful verses, both in Arabic and in Persian."

In *The Book of the Learned Men* written by Ibn al Kifti in the thirteenth century, the following interesting and well-known criticism occurs: "Omar al-Khayyámi, Imam of

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Khorassan, was the most learned man of his day. Not only was he versed in all the wisdom of the Greeks, but he encouraged the search after the One and preached the elevation and purification of the soul through abstinence from the things of the flesh. He also taught the necessity of studying science according to the principles of the Greeks. The later Sufis have professed to find in his verses confirmation of their own doctrines, and have discussed them both in private and at public meetings. But their inner meanings are as stinging serpents to the Mussulman law, hence the men of his day hated him and exposed the secrets he would fain have concealed, so that, fearing for his life, he controlled his tongue and pen. He performed pilgrimages not from piety but from fear, and thus one of his evil secrets was revealed. When he came to Baghddad men of his way of thinking, of ancient wisdom, came to him, but he shut the door on them with the shutting of repentance, not that of companionship. And he returned from the pilgrimage to his own city, visiting morning and evening

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the places of worship and concealing his secret thoughts, which, nevertheless, were revealed. There was no one equal to him in astronomy and philosophy; in these his name was a proverb. Oh, that he might have escaped the wrath of God! But his fugitive verses reveal his hidden thoughts, and their fount of conception is troubled by the turbidness of their secret intent."

The following extract is taken from the *Attar al Bilad* of Zakaria Kazwini: "Omar al-Khayyámi was one of the learned men of Nishapur. He was learned in all branches of knowledge and especially in mathematics. He lived in the time of Sultan Malik Shah the Seljuk, who gave him much money to buy astronomical instruments and to make astronomical observations, but unhappily the Sultan died before these were completed. It is said that whilst Omar was staying at a caravanserai he heard the people complaining of the numerous flocks of birds whose pollutions soiled their garments. Then Omar took clay and out of it made a bird which he placed

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on the highest part of the caravanseraï, and the birds were afraid and troubled that place no more. It is said further that in Nishapur one of the Doctors of the Law used to come to Omar every morning before sunrise to be instructed by him in philosophy, and going his way denounced his teacher to the public for his heretical opinions. Word of this being brought to Omar he summoned all the drummers and trumpeters, and when the Doctor of the Law came to him as usual for his lesson Omar commanded them to sound their drums and trumpets and thus gathered about him people from all quarters (of the city). Then said Omar, addressing the multitude, ‘Men of Nishapur, behold your man of learning! Every morning at this hour he comes to me to be instructed in philosophy, then goes his way among you, and speaks evil words concerning me. If I am what he says I am, why does he come to me to be instructed, and if I am not why then does he speak evil of his teacher?’”

In a book called *Firdâus al Tawarikh*,

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dating from the fourteenth century, we find the following: "Omar bin Ibrahim al-Khayyámi was celebrated in his time for his wisdom in all branches of learning, and especially for his knowledge of Astronomy. He was the author of the incomparable and universally known verses." . . . Here follow a number of quatrains which need not be translated here.

Another writer, by name Abul Hassan al Baihaki (A.H. 505, A.D. 1111-1112) tells how on a certain occasion he visited Omar in his house, and was asked by him to explain a certain verse from Hamasa. In the *Tariki Alfi*, to which reference has already been made, Omar is alluded to as "Omar Khayyam the wise, one of the most learned men of Khorassán, as a philosopher ranking with Avicenna. . . . Because he found it not expedient to spread abroad knowledge, he did not write many books, but two of his works are very famous. One of these, the *Balance of Wisdom*, deals with the method of determining the value of articles set with precious stones, without the necessity of removing the stones. The other is

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entitled *Needs of Places*. It deals with the four seasons of the year, and the causes of variations in climate in different regions and countries."

Further interesting references to the learning and the fame of Omar are met with in the *Tazkirei Shuara* of Doylat Shah of Samarkand.¹

From certain passages in his works it has been inferred that Omar was a believer in the doctrine of the transmigration of souls. On one occasion an old seminary in Nishapur, in which Omar was wont to meet his pupils, was under repair. A large number of donkeys were employed to carry the bricks required by the workmen. One day one of the donkeys refused to enter the courtyard, where the Imam (Omar) was giving a lesson. Observing this with a quiet smile, Omar gently approached the stubborn animal and repeated aloud a few impromptu verses, whereupon the donkey pricked up his ears and immediately passed into the courtyard with his load. The students demanding an explanation Omar replied, saying,

¹ The Persian text of this work has been published under the editorship of Prof. E. G. Browne of Cambridge.

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“The soul of this donkey at one time occupied the body of a former teacher in this seminary, and he refused to enter until he found that he met with recognition on the part of his equals.” Possibly, however, the anecdote means no more than that Omar was not without his share of ironic humour.

In all or most of the contemporary references to Omar we find that his fame is based chiefly on his reputation as an astronomer. In 1074 A.D. along with six others, he was summoned to Merv by the Sultan Malik Shah in order to reform the Calendar. The result was the well-known Jaláli era—“a computation of time,” according to Gibbon, “which surpasses the Julian and approaches the accuracy of the Gregorian style.”

Whilst we thus hear of Omar as teacher, philosopher, mathematician and astronomer, there is never a word as to his having engaged in the trade of tent-making. Every circumstance in his life and in his environment goes to show the improbability if not actually the impossibility of his having followed such an

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occupation. The education he received, the companionships he formed, the sciences he mastered, the pilgrimages he made, even the books he wrote—though these are comparatively few, only seven having come down to us—all point to the conclusion that ever and always he was a scholar and a scholar only. From the fact that he was commissioned by the Sultan Malik Shah to buy astronomical instruments and appointed by the same enlightened monarch to assist in reforming the Calendar, it might be not unfair to classify him simply as an astronomer. Assuredly, throughout both east and west, in his own day and later, it was on his astronomical achievements that his fame was entirely based. To western nations he is now known almost solely as the poet—the author of the wonderful *Rubāiyāt*. That he is a true poet no one will deny, however much critics may say he owes to Fitzgerald's charming translation, but he was even greater as a man of science, and therein lies his true title to his niche in the temple of Fame.

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No mediæval scholar has been happier in his biographers than Omar, whom even his enemies praise. Fanatical Mohammedans as many of them were, Omar's characteristic freedom of thought and expression must have been a bitter pill for them to swallow, and it says much for Omar's merits and not a little for his biographer's generosity that they have for the most part been so liberal in their appreciation of the work he accomplished. It would also appear as if by common consent they had agreed to pass over in silence all that they could not praise. Posterity has thus been spared the spectacle of an unedifying display of cavilling and narrowmindedness, but at the same time is deprived of much valuable information concerning the details of Omar's life and more especially of his opinions and teaching.

From one or two of the extracts quoted in this chapter it might almost be inferred that Omar was one of the recognised teachers in the seminary of his native city. This, I think, highly improbable. His views on many subjects were known to be too much at variance

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with the tenets of the Koran for him to have held any responsible post under the direct control of some of its most orthodox exponents in the principal religious seminary of Khorassán. At the most he may have acted as private tutor, or extra-mural lecturer so to say, to certain individuals or groups of individuals who were content to pursue in secret the search after truth, or whose enthusiasm for knowledge outran their fear of the ecclesiastical authorities.

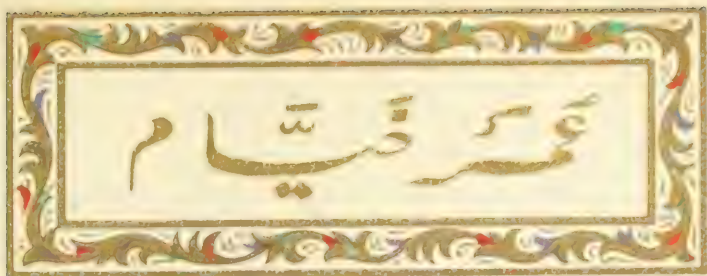
But if Omar's life were not exactly the bed of roses the hedonistic spirit of the *Rubáiyat* might lead us to suppose, doubtless he had his consolations. Philosophy in itself is a great consoler. It is something all one's life long to have been the associate of the wise and great. Princes and potentates delighted to call him friend. "Malik Shah treated him as a companion," says the *Nuzhat al Arwāh*, "and the Khakan Shams ul Mulk of Bokhara respected him so much that he bade him (Omar) sit beside him on the throne." If he had his share of the misunderstanding that always falls to the lot of a man born in advance of his age, he had like-

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wise his due meed of the honours and even of the emoluments that are the rightful reward of the original thinker and discoverer, though he may not always be so fortunate as to come by them. On the whole, we need not pity Omar. Was he not of those who realise that "wisdom is the principal thing?" With all his getting he had gotten understanding. Above all, he had cultivated that habit of mind which alone is proof against the foes that lie in wait for us, "invincible," as Goethe says, "save by cheerfulness and equanimity."

"Die Seligkeit wohnt in der eigenen Brust,
Hier musst du sie ewig begründen."





Chapter Four: Omar's Philosophy



IN Europe the commonly accepted idea concerning Omar's philosophy of life is that he was throughout a convinced and unwavering sceptic.

At the very outset I must join issue with those who uphold this opinion, and, while I am not prepared to maintain that European writers on the subject have totally misinterpreted Omar's teaching, — I am compelled to say that they have taken considerable liberty in elucidating his views.

The philosophy of Omar, such as it was, had been largely forced upon him by circumstances. Philosophy is not always the result

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of calm and patient reasoning, of a serene and dignified contemplation of human life in relation to higher things, or the inspiration of a superior intellect brought to bear upon the circumstances of mankind. More frequently than not it is the outcome of a certain experience of life, and bears the stamp of its author's personality in combination with such influences as have gone to mould his character and environment.

The determining factor in the early life of Omar, as in that of every Mohammedan, was his religion—the religion of Islam with its doctrine of complete submission to the Divine Will—of Fatalism. “What must be, will be” was the watchword of the age, inciting the more impetuous spirits to headlong conquest in the name of Allah, hypnotising the more timid to supine acquiescence in the decrees of Fate.

Omar would seem to have been a man in whose temperament both these characteristics were about equally blended, though the task he set himself was the attainment of knowledge, not the conquest of men. Determined, almost defiant at times in his quest of the unknown, he

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was yet subject to fits of despondency in which he was tempted to despair of himself, of mankind, of God, of everything. In particular he despaired of the Mohammedan religion. As his biographers have informed us, he was thoroughly familiar with the Koran and the works of its various commentators, so familiar as to be regarded as an authority whose readings were worthy of the most careful consideration, however heterodox they might be in their tendencies. Thus, when he condemned, it was not in ignorance. He clearly realised that whatever might be the possibilities of Mohammedanism when broadly and liberally interpreted, its spiritual influence on the great mass of its professors was practically *nil*. Its precepts lent themselves only too readily to make of religion a mere matter of ceremonial rites, having no bearing whatever on conduct or the moral life of the people. In fact, certain of its doctrines tended rather in the direction of moral degradation and at the same time were intellectually stultifying. By definitely confining man's knowledge of God and of the universe within

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the narrow limits of the Koran it had successfully stifled, except in the most exceptional instances, all healthy desire for knowledge, all determination to conquer the secrets of nature, all speculation on the being and attributes of God. The majority of professing Mohamedans had become careless of everything but their physical well-being. Their real gods were idleness and luxury. To make the best both of this world and the next they had only to be punctilious in the observance of certain ceremonies. They filled their pockets and secured Paradise at the same time. And all this notwithstanding the most hairsplitting theological discussions, the most minutely detailed exposition of knotty points of the Law on the part of the “two and seventy jarring sects” at whom Omar flings his half-contemptuous gibe.

But there were others — no insignificant minority—to whom, as to Omar, this formal, soul-destroying creed was utterly unsatisfactory. Each groping after Truth according to his lights, by various pathways sought to reach

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another God than the God of the Koran—a God worshipped through fear of His power rather than venerated as a higher and purer Being—a God holding Himself aloof from the world and the affairs of men whose lot He has nevertheless determined from all Eternity. In the course of the centuries which had elapsed since first the victorious Arabs forced their faith upon the conquered kingdom, many men had arisen throughout Persia to proclaim with fervour the faith that was in them. Jeer as Omar might at the “jarring sects,” many of them had passed through their baptism of blood and fire at the hands of the fanatic populace, in not a few the devout seeker after a higher faith had found the satisfaction of his desires. Of these the only one that falls to be noticed here is the sect of the Sūfis, since it is that to which Omar is held to have belonged by many educated Persians of to-day.

Sūfism is a creed which embraces within itself elements drawn from many religions. It is a compound of Vedantism and Mohammedanism and at the same time embodies one of the

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characteristic tenets of Christianity—the doctrine of self-sacrifice. The pantheistic element predominates. The favourite watchword of Islam, the unity of God, means for the Sûfi that God is all. Sûfism affirms the existence of God and of the human soul as originally one with God, to whom it is only to be reunited by the subjugation of the passions and of the power of the flesh. The devotee of Sûfism must strive towards perfection through three degrees. Of these the first is the Law, wherein the Sûfi is nothing more than a Moslem perfect in all the ordinances of the Koran and of blameless morality. The incentive to obedience is, however, not the fear of punishment nor hope of reward, but love. Second is the Way or Method, wherein the devotee develops into the ascetic, gives himself up to fasting in solitude and silence, studies Sûfistic lore, purges himself of all worldly thoughts, and occasionally rises into a state of ecstasy. The third and final degree is Certainty. The transcendental, objective God has now become subjective. The Sûfi is now consciously God. The outward

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observances of religion are superfluous for him.

Like other great religions Sūfism is divided into a number of minor sects, each attaching a superlative importance to one or other of the Sūfistic doctrines to the exclusion of others which are rejected as unnecessary. But whether professing his creed in its entirety or with modifications, in all Mohammedan countries the Sūfi must practise the mysteries of his faith in secret, if he would avoid persecution or even extermination. Outwardly he must conform to the ritual of Mohammedanism, an equivocal position which the characteristic tenets of his religion easily permit him to justify to himself, whether he has attained the perfection of the third degree of development or is still only in the first.

It is to the Sūfis that Hafiz and Sadi and the majority of Persian poets and authors belong, in common with the greater number of educated and literary Persians at the present day. From the ever present necessity for concealment has arisen the characteristic symbolism or mysticism

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of language, which is at once so familiar and so baffling to all readers of their works. Their luscious outpourings in praise of love and wine, of beauty's charms and the joys of intoxication may be understood either in a literal or a spiritual sense. Thanks to their peculiar and characteristic vocabulary, a quatrain apparently celebrating with bacchanalian fervour the joys of the wine cup may be an ecstatic hymn of faith, whilst a couplet that might have been borrowed from the Song of Solomon may give expression to the idea of the spiritual union of the soul with God.

I regret that I cannot agree with the majority of Persian critics, or with M. Nicolas and those who unite with him, in classifying Omar with the Sûfis. That he was familiar with their views I do not doubt, and they may to a certain extent have affected his philosophic development, as their vocabulary has indubitably influenced the imagery of his poems. But in the end he remained unconvinced. He gave in his adherence to no religious sect. Agnosticism, not faith, is the keynote of his works. But

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it is always Agnosticism modified by Moham-
medanism and a very human liking for the joys
of life. When the perpetual negation of
Agnosticism becomes intolerable he seeks to
forget it in the delights of the senses. At one
moment he is the baffled philosopher beating
with angry hands against the barriers of the
unseen. The next he is the reckless pleasure-
seeker intent only to quench in the wine cup
the diviner age to know.

“ Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and Saint, and heard great Argument
About it and about : but evermore
Came out by the same door as in I went.

“ With them the Seed of Wisdom did I sow,
And with my own hand laboured it to grow :
And this was all the Harvest that I reaped—
‘ I came like Water, and like Wind I go.’

“ Into this Universe, and *why* not knowing,
Nor *whence*, like Water willy-nilly flowing :
And out of it as Wind along the Waste,
I know not *whither*, willy-nilly blowing.

“ What, without asking, hither hurried *whence* ?
And without asking, *whither* hurried hence !—
Another and another Cup to drown
The Memory of this Impertinence !”

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Here to my mind, we have the whole gist of Omar's philosophy of life in a nutshell. He is attracted by the riddle of the origin and the end of man. He is convinced that it is incapable of satisfactory solution. He seeks forgetfulness if not compensation in the delights of the senses. He is of a nature too robust to be for long weighed down by the sense of the futility of the endeavour of the less to comprehend the greater. His sane and heartwhole appreciation of the beauties of nature and the joys of life helps him to triumph over the vapours born of a too strenuous devotion to dry-as-dust philosophies and the depression arising from disappointment in his fellowmen.

We have seen how his scientific discoveries and his freethinking attitude towards religion were the means of stirring up hatred and suspicion in the minds of his contemporaries. And, if there were moments when, as the result of knowing himself misunderstood and unappreciated he gave way, temporarily, to fits of depression, there were, too, moments of happiness in work well done—of exultation in some

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fresh discovery, some new scientific theory, opening before his delighted eyes fresh vistas in the field of knowledge.

It was at such times as these doubtless that Omar rose to the *timbre psychologique* of the poet, his mood finding expression in those verses, pleasantly grave or recklessly gay, that have made his name immortal. He resigns himself to his limitations in a philosophic spirit and cheerfully accepts the good things of this world, rejoicing in the coming of spring, the dawn, the rose—everything that speaks to him of rejuvenation, of regeneration. High above all he celebrates the wine cup with its treasure of liquid life for shrivelled veins—the snow-cooled wine of Persia, sparkling, ruby-tinted, doubly sweet in that it is forbidden.

More has been made of Omar's praise of the wine cup than is perhaps altogether justifiable. When his reckless mood is upon him he quaffs it ostentatiously, in defiance of the narrow creed that would have bandaged the eyes of the seeker after truth and set a fence about the field of human knowledge. This, of course,

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speaking figuratively. He would have made himself anathema among learned and unlearned alike had he openly indulged and indulged to excess in the forbidden juice of the grape.

Moreover, even if he would he could not have indulged in public drinking-bouts, taverns or wine-shops being almost unknown in Mohammedan countries in Omar's time. Here and there might have been found a wretched tavern of the humblest sort, kept by some poverty-stricken Jew or Christian on behalf of such of his co-religionists as might find themselves tolerated in the land of the Moslem, but no self-respecting Mohammedan would have demeaned himself or imperilled his soul's salvation by crossing its threshold. Certainly not a man of the position and prestige of Omar, who, whatever may have been his real views, was always sufficiently respectful of the outward observances of the faith as not to render himself unduly conspicuous. At the very worst, in common with other young men just out of leading strings, he may, as a youth, occasionally have frequented such resorts as a test to himself

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and a proof to others of his emancipation from the thrall of Islam. But very soon common prudence, if nothing else, would have dictated more circumspect behaviour.

On the other hand, when age was creeping upon him, and with failing powers of mind and body, fits of despondency became more frequent, it is possible that he may have sought solace in

. . . "the Cup that clears
To-day of past Regrets and future Fears,"

more frequently than was altogether desirable. The subject is one on which his biographers are silent, but surrounded as he was by enemies only too willing to make capital out of any deviations on his part from the strict path of propriety, we may well suppose that however ecstasically he may chant its praises, his devotion to the wine cup never manifested itself in such a way as to give rise to public scandal. Something must be allowed for poetic license: something also for the ebullition in verse of the defiant spirit he dared not show in act towards his *bête noir* the "True Believer," whom he

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would so gladly have seen "overtaken unaware" in wine-bibbing or any of the other sins he hugged in his heart but dared not openly to commit.

Moreover, as far as the rank and file of his Mohammedan fellow-countrymen were concerned, Omar felt that he had no reputation to lose.

"Indeed the Idols I have loved so long
Have done my credit in Men's Eye much wrong."

Wine may have been one of these Idols. But it was not the only one. Liberty of thought, the search after Truth, the discoveries of science were equally under one condemnation in the eyes of the orthodox. The attitude of mind is perhaps not one we greatly care to contemplate in the philosopher, but it is very human, very easy to comprehend and sympathise with, and entirely excusable in the poet.

Here I should like to call attention to the probability that the *Rubáiyát* is not a consecutive piece of work, but was written by Omar at different times and under the influence

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of varying moods. Some such hypothesis is necessary to explain the contrasting, sometimes almost contradictory sentiments advanced in certain of the verses. The tendency of the age was to express itself in flowery and poetic language, and we find that, in common with Omar, other philosophers and writers of scientific works were wont occasionally to clothe their thoughts in rhythm. But learning, not poetry was their *métier*, the latter being regarded as a relaxation from the serious business of life rather than as offering a rarer medium than prose for the embodiment of ideas.

Thus, in the *Rubāiyât* we look in vain for any carefully reasoned system of philosophy. Each verse or group of verses merely records a certain mood, the outcome of a different point of view—fatalistic, agnostic, or hedonistic as the case may be. From the prevailing tendency we are able to piece together Omar's conclusions. The figure of the Potter's Shop, for example, embodies a different theory of man's conception of God in every verse, and with each we feel that Omar was to a certain extent in sympathy,

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if indeed they do not represent the successive steps by which he finally arrived at agnostic conclusions. That he should arrive at such conclusions was almost inevitable, his scientific discoveries having proved the futility of the Koran's explanation of natural phenomena, whilst his enlightened and broadly sympathetic mind utterly rejected its theology as an explanation of the nature of God and His relation to the universe. Looking around him in those days of ecclesiastical and political storm and stress, he was struck above all things with the inhumanity of man to man and the apparent indifference of the Creator he had been taught to believe in. He saw the most ardent followers of the Prophet animated by hatred and strife and every evil passion, under the domination of a body of men, believers like themselves, in whose hands religion had become but an instrument to exploit the many for the advantage of the few. Widely read as he was in the literature and history of other times and other peoples, his mind was stored with instances of individuals—Zoroaster, Buddha, the Christ—who whilst

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themselves striving increasingly towards the realisation of the highest ideals were nevertheless tolerant of the failures and shortcomings of their weaker fellow mortals. What was the source of their tolerance, their generosity? Full of love and pity as they were, were not such men endowed with more god-like attributes than Allah, the God of the Koran, omnipotent, cruel, unfeeling, as He was represented to be—ever ready to visit with condign punishment the faults and backslidings of the miserable beings for whose existence He Himself was responsible, and whose deeds were the outcome of His will as expressed in the instincts He had implanted in them from the beginning of time.

Like Maeterlinck in our own time, Omar sees God in the form of Fate as "some monstrous, external force which compels and enslaves human beings from the outside." Men are but "puppets, swayed hither and thither by the mysterious influences of a destiny which they cannot understand but only obey." Overwhelmed by the sense of this mysterious and awful power, there are moments in which Omar

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becomes forgetful of all his philosophy and bursts into prayer that is half a protest.

“Oh Thou, who didst with Pitfall and with Gin
Beset the road I was to wander in,
Thou wilt not with Predestination round
Enmesh me, and impute my fall to Sin.”

From this external, arbitrary destiny Maeterlinck escapes by way of Positivism. For Omar there is no way of escape.

“’Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days
Where Destiny with men for Pieces plays:
Hither and thither moves, and mates, and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays.”

But where his religion fails his reason comes to the rescue and rejects as untenable the idea of human responsibility, if indeed it is a blind relentless force that rules the universe. And, after hinting at the various more satisfactory views that might be entertained of the nature of God, he gives up the problem and goes back to his old conclusion to let be the “quarrel of the universe.” In other words he falls back upon Agnosticism and counsels making the most of such tangible gifts as life has to offer. Frankly he seizes upon the present hour and

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finds in its manifold delights ample compensation for care and disappointment. The beauty of the rose or of the dawn of day; the song of the nightingale or the rhythm of verse; the love of woman or the intoxication of wine; everything, in short, that appeals to his sense of poetic and artistic fitness, is joyously hailed as a minister of healing to a mind outworn with fruitless speculation and vain discussion.

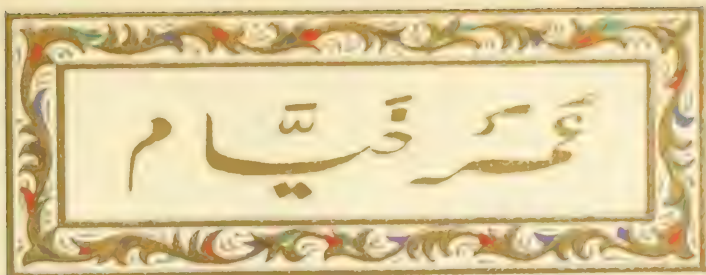
All this is intensely modern; and it may well be that it is the note of modernity sounding through the philosophy of the eastern sage that has found so full and far an echo in the minds of his western admirers. None who is familiar with the *Rubáiyát* will deny that the general tendency of the work is agnostic. But I would lay stress on the fact that there are moments when Omar's philosophic attitude gives way, and for the time being he is a Deist, and appeals to the Deity, belief in whose existence and omnipotence was the central feature of his childhood's faith. "The claws of a superstition stick."

And so to-day. When the western agnostic

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speaks of the God that may be and His possible relations to the Cosmos, he too expresses himself in terms of Theism. But, heir as he is to a heredity and a civilisation which are the outgrowth of Christianity, the God he postulates is not the blind, relentless destiny of Islam, the shadow of whose cruelty lies dark over Omar's sunny philosophy, but an Intelligence, the laws of whose being are the law of Order and the law of Love.

In conclusion, let me say, that in order to be rightly understood the philosophy of Omar al-Khayyámi must be read in the light of his life-long activity in the cause of learning. Work was the mainspring of his life as pleasure is the keynote of his verses. From the two together we may conjure up some idea of the man—ardent, strenuous, indefatigable in pursuit whether of labour or of enjoyment. Who shall say he was other than a philosopher and that in the highest sense of the word?



Chapter Five : Death & Unpopularity



THE circumstances surrounding the death of Omar al-Khayyami are for the most part involved in mystery. To judge from certain sayings of his that

have come down to us, it would seem that in the early part of his career—full as it was of disappointment and discouragement, of petty cares and persecutions—Omar looked upon death as upon the face of a friend whose hand should draw aside the curtain that separated him from a world of freedom and philosophic calm. Later, it became the “veil past which he could not see,” the “door to which he

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found no key," the "darker draught" than wine, which all must drink—*should* drink unshrinkingly.

On this point as on so many others Omar's views were at variance with those of the orthodox Mohammedan, for whom death is the gateway to a Paradise of everlasting idleness and unlimited indulgence in sensual pleasures—a garden of enervating airs and odours, of perpetual music and feasting, of unending dalliance with the black-eyed houris of the Prophet's tropical imagination. For Omar the changing kaleidoscope of the senses belongs not to the future, but is a thing of to-day. It is to its very evanescence that the joy of life owes half its ecstasy:—

“ Ah, make the most of what we yet may spend,
Before we too into the Dust descend ;
Dust unto Dust and under Dust to lie.
Sans Wine, sans Song, sans Singer and—sans End.”

To the sage even annihilation was preferable to the mere perpetuation of a crude sensualism. As all readers of the *Rubaiyat* know, his attitude towards death was very much that of

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the modern agnostic. Death was the *end* of life, the *beginning* of he knew not what, most probably the "Dawn of Nothing."

"And if the Wine you drink, the Lip you press,
End in the Nothing all things end in—Yes—
Then fancy while Thou art, Thou art but what
Thou shalt be—Nothing—Thou shalt not be less."

Thus calmly philosophical in his survey of the future, Omar carries with a loving tenderness over all that is beautiful and joyous in the present. Even the tomb touches him with no thought of melancholy, if only it be hedged about with beauty.

"Ah, with the Grape my fading Life provide,
And wash my Body whence the Life has died,
And in a Winding-sheet of Vine-leaf wrapt,
So bury me by some sweet Garden-side."

It is interesting in this connection to compare the following quotation from the writings of Nizami Aruzi:¹—

"In the year A.H. 506 (A.D. 1112-1113) Khaja Imam Omar al-Khayyami and Khaja Imam Muzzafar i Isfizari had alighted in the city of Balkh, in the street of the slave-sellers,

¹ *Chahar Makala*, tr. by Prof. E. G. Browne.

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in the house of Amir Abu Sáad, and I had joined that assembly. In the midst of our convivial gathering I heard that Argument of Truth (Hujjat ul Haqq), Omar, say :—‘ My grave will be in a spot where the trees will shed their blossoms on me twice in each year.’ This thing seemed to me impossible though I knew that one such as he would not speak idle words. When I arrived in Nishapur in the year A.H. 530 (A.D. 1135-1136), it being then some years since that great man had veiled his countenance in the dust and this lower world had been bereaved of him, I went to visit his grave on the eve of a Friday (seeing that he had the claim of a master on me), taking with me a guide to point out to me his tomb. So he brought me out to the Hira cemetery, I turned to the left, and his tomb lay at the foot of a garden wall, over which pear trees and peach trees thrust their heads, and on his grave had fallen many flowers. Then I remembered that saying in the city of Balkh, and I fell to weeping because on the face of the earth and in all the regions of the habitable world I nowhere saw one like unto him,

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may God (blessed and exalted is He!) have mercy upon him by His grace and His favour."

Here we have Omar apparently predicting the exact situation of his grave, amid, as we shall see later, what would have been very unusual surroundings according to Persian burial customs. "But," continues the cautious chronicler, "although I witnessed this prognostication on the part of that Proof of Wisdom, Omar, I did not observe that he had any great belief in astrological predictions, nor have I seen or heard of any of the great (scientists) who had such belief."

As to the manner of Omar's death very little is known, and such testimony as we have is not greatly to be relied on. In the writings of *Nuzhat ul Arwah* we read as follows: "On the day of his death it is said that Omar was using a golden toothpick and attentively reading the chapter on Metaphysics in Avicenna's Book of Healing. When he reached the section on 'The One and the Many,' he placed the golden toothpick between the leaves, arose, made his prayers, and laid

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upon his friends his last injunctions. After this he neither ate nor drank, and when he had performed his evening prayer, he bowed himself to the ground and cried aloud: 'O God, verily I have sought to know Thee to the extent of my powers. Forgive me therefore. My knowledge of Thee is my recommendation to Thee.'¹ So saying he died. May God have mercy upon him."

Much the same account is given by Imam Muhammad of Baghdad, who claims to have been an eye witness. "Omar," says Muhammad, "was reading the chapter on Metaphysics in Avicenna's Book of Healing. On reaching the section on the One and the Many, he placed something between the leaves and said to me, 'Call the people, that I may lay upon them my last injunctions.' His disciples having gathered around him he stood up and repeated his prayers according to the prescribed form, taking no notice of those present. As he began the evening prayer he fell to the ground and exclaimed, 'Verily, I have sought to know

¹ See Abul Hassan al Baihaki.

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Thee according to my powers. Forgive me. My knowledge is my recommendation to Thee.' With these words he resigned his soul to God." It is said that the following were his last verses.¹ "O God I am ashamed of mine Ignorance—of my Nothingness. O, Thou, who out of nothing didst create all things, uplift me from this nothingness to Thine own honour and glory."

Closely as does the testimony of Imam Muhammad coincide with that of Nuzhat ul Arwah, I am not inclined to lay much stress on either as a faithful account of the circumstances attendant upon the death of Omar. Obviously, each is a pious attempt on the part of the good Mussulman biographer to reconcile his admiration for a revered teacher with the orthodox tenets of his creed—to assure the true believer that however the Master may have lived he at all events died in the odour of sanctity. Modern critics will find it difficult to believe as much. All his life long Omar had lived in philosophic scorn of the orthodoxy which flouted while it feared him. In the face of constant

¹ These verses are not found in any of his works.

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opposition and even persecution he had throughout his career consistently maintained doctrines entirely at variance with the stereotyped science and philosophy of Mohammedanism. It is impossible to suppose, therefore, that a man of his temperament and convictions should at the last moment, and for no sufficient reason—for there was nothing in the already familiar chapter on the One and the Many to suddenly convince him of sin—apparently be smitten with a sense of the utter vanity of his life-work, and with his last breath give utterance to a prayer worthy of being taken as the dying confession of faith of the most orthodox follower of Islam. There is a certainty in his asseveration of and his appeal to the Divine Omnipotence which is altogether foreign to his philosophy as interpreted by European scholars. On the other hand the temptation was strong on the part of those who stood about the departing sage to read into any words he may have uttered the meaning which, as the dying speech of a professing Mohammedan, they ought to have borne. The evil disposition

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towards him of the Mussulman authorities was at all times only too well known, and his friends might well have feared that even burial according to Mohammedan rites might be denied him had they not come forward with some assurance of his having died in the true faith.

While such considerations as these compel one to reject, untroubled by regret, the idea of anything like a death-bed repentance on Omar's part, one is glad to cling to the thought that his last hours were solaced by the companionship and sympathy of friends so devoted that they were even willing to stretch truth itself a point in his favour. Even to a philosopher like Omar, accustomed as he was to the loneliness of "the thought that dwells apart," it was no small thing to know himself lapped in an atmosphere of love and reverence in that dark hour when, to use his own beautiful and pathetic words,

"The stars are setting and the Caravan
Starts for the Dawn of Nothing. . . ."

He was an old man and full of years. He had known labour and sorrow. Perchance to

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such the prospect of Eternal Rest holds as much of promise as does to others the hope of Eternal Life.

The year 1123 A.D. is usually assigned as the date of Omar's death. This agrees tolerably well with the testimony of Nizami Aruzi who, in the passage quoted above, alludes to his pilgrimage to Omar's grave as having occurred in 1135-36 "some years after that great man had veiled his countenance in the dust." The date of his meeting with Omar at Balkh is further given as 1113 A.D. so that we know his death must have taken place sometime between that date and 1135 A.D.

According to Nizami Aruzi, Omar was buried as he had prophesied "in a spot where the trees shed their blossoms on his grave twice a year." However this may have been in the days of Aruzi the surroundings now are entirely changed, and in view of Persian burial customs I have difficulty in understanding how they ever could have existed. In Persia, from time immemorial, the site of a burial-ground was selected for its remoteness from human habita-

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tion. It is, accordingly, somewhat difficult to credit Aruzi's statement that the tomb of Omar was placed in close proximity to a garden wall. Certainly no such wall exists to-day nor any trace of it. On the contrary, in the Hira cemetery at Nishapur the reputed grave of Omar occupies a lonely spot, and is marked by a stone of the plainest, most ordinary description, devoid even of an inscription to say who sleeps beneath. From this last circumstance I am strongly inclined to doubt its authenticity. For, whilst it is not the custom in Persia to place a wall around a cemetery, nor to bestow upon the graves the attention they receive in western countries, yet the greatest possible care is taken to give correct data on the tombstones as to the name, age, occupation, etc. of the dead. The one well-known instance in which the grave of a Persian is tended with almost European care is the tomb of the poet, Hafiz, which lies in the midst of a beautiful grove of rose and cypress trees and has become a place of pilgrimage for all true lovers of ancient Persian lyric poetry. No such care has been

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lavished on the grave of Omar al-Khayyámi; and whilst, of course, it is possible that the Mohammedan authorities of his day may have denied his friends the opportunity to carry out his special and very unusual desires, one can scarcely believe that they would refuse them the right to inscribe upon the tombstone, at least the name of a man so widely and so justly celebrated. It seems, therefore, extremely probable that the grave pointed out as Omar's is not Omar's at all, or, if it is, then the tombstone is not the one originally erected at the time of his death. It is possible also that Aruzi somewhat exaggerates when, on visiting the master's tomb, he professes to have found it so exactly as Omar had described it prior to his death. From the enthusiasm with which he invariably speaks of Omar, Aruzi would seem to have been under some deep, personal obligation to the latter, and it may be that in his desire to magnify his hero he has been tempted to enhance the glory of the sage by endowing him with the attributes of the seer. But nameless and untended as it is to-day, adorned with

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no touch of the beauty Omar craved—uncertain even as is the situation of his last resting-place, history and tradition are alike unanimous in placing it *somewhere* in the Hira cemetery at Nishapur. And there are not wanting, even among orthodox Persians, pious pilgrims who are wont to worship at that neglected shrine, there to do homage to the memory of the philosopher-poet whose wisdom was the wonder of the eastern world in the eleventh century, as his verses are the admiration of the western world to-day.

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The idea is universally current among European and American writers that neither in his own day nor in ours did Omar al-Khayyami meet with that recognition from the people of Persia to which his scientific and literary attainments entitle him. They hold that Omar was and is misunderstood by his fellow-countrymen, whose culture did not and does not admit of their forming a just estimate of the value of his works.

Now, that the works of Omar are in the twentieth century, as they were in the eleventh,

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“caviare to the general,” cannot be denied, but they are not more so than are the works of Shakespeare, let us say, to the uneducated masses of England and America. Moreover, to a large section even of educated Persians the works of Omar must ever remain under a bann, totally at variance as they are with the tenets of the Koran and the doctrines of the Mohammedan sect to which the majority of Persians belong. Not want of education but religious prejudice is what stands in the way of Omar’s popularity. Nevertheless, among the more cultured classes, there are many who have not forgotten their ancient birthright, but claim the right to think and judge for themselves even as their forefathers did before Islam had laid its petrifying hand upon them. These now, as did the bolder spirits in the days of Omar, form a select and advanced body of highly educated men and women, capable not only of understanding and criticising the works of the great Persian, but of justly appreciating the latest discoveries of modern science and the teaching of latter-day philosophers.

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Not from any want of culture therefore, not from any inability to appraise the works of genius does the modern Persian leave the writings of Omar in the dust of neglect. It is solely on religious grounds, solely on account of their heretical doctrines, that they have failed to achieve in Persia the popularity that has been accorded to them by western and more especially by English-speaking nations.

In the eleventh century religious fanaticism played a much more conspicuous part in Persia than it does to-day. As we have already seen, the independent free-thinking Persian did not readily assimilate the literal teaching of Mohammed. Thus, three centuries before the birth of Omar, the country became divided between the two great sects of the Shi-ites and the Sūnnites, each divided into numerous smaller sects agreed only in one point, that of hating each other with a deadly hatred. As a student, and afterwards as a teacher, Omar must have been well acquainted with the details of the various schisms, but he identified himself with no sect in particular, and in consequence,

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was cordially detested by all. Careless of public opinion he freely criticised and frequently rejected the readings of the Koran submitted by its various exponents in the schools. His opinions were passed from mouth to mouth, from mosque to mosque, and, losing nothing in transit, speedily won for him the reputation of one who believed in nothing, or at any rate in nothing orthodox. What did the narrow-minded fanatics by whom he was surrounded care for the originality, for the genius of a man like Omar? All that concerned them was his attitude towards the true faith as they understood it, his punctual observance of the ordained ritual, his careful performance of the prescribed prayers and ablutions. The rest they were incapable of understanding, and what they could not understand was condemned as evil and visited accordingly with hatred, with slander, with persecution.

The second reason for Omar's want of popularity was social. In spite of everything—his alien descent, his avowed scepticism, his religious enemies—Omar by the sheer force of

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his genius, had achieved greatness. His name was famous throughout the length and breadth of the east. He was the friend of kings, the revered associate of philosophers. Nevertheless he had not the gift of making himself a general favourite. Flattery came not readily to his tongue; gossip and scandal he detested; nor could he stoop to humble himself, courtier fashion, before those whom he knew to be intellectually his inferiors. The courtiers and lesser men of learning who frequented the court hated him for his blunt honesty and the courage with which he maintained even unpalatable opinions. They were jealous of the deference paid to him by monarchs and grandees, who honoured him no less for his learning and wisdom than because he never craved for wealth, for position, for royal favours, but was content with a moderate competence, and sufficient opportunity to prosecute his studies in peace. It must be admitted that in his treatment of those about him there was a certain brusqueness and abruptness of manner, a little too much

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carelessness, perhaps, in hiding the contempt he felt for their petty plottings and subterfuges. Nor was this attitude altogether unintentional, a mere outcome of the eccentricity of genius. None knew better than Omar how every fawning professor of friendship might prove a spy in the pay of his religious or political enemies, desirous only of effecting his downfall or possibly of compassing his death. "Think as your master thinks," was the motto of the age, and if it suited some jealous rival to denounce him as a heretic, what was there to prevent the fanatic mob from tearing him limb from limb? Thus Omar found it his safest policy to keep his associates at arm's length, careless of the enemies he made so long as he retained the friendship of the trusted few whose friendship was worth having.

A third and purely political reason for Omar's want of popularity remains to be considered. In a former chapter I have alluded to the early friendship which existed between Omar and Hassan Sabbah, afterwards founder of the notorious sect of the Assassins. It

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would appear that Omar's youthful association with this infamous wretch, much as he regretted it, was never forgotten. In it his traducers found a weapon ready to their hand whenever they desired to excite the suspicions and arouse the hatred of the numerous individuals whose kindred had suffered at the hands of Hassan and his emissaries.

Thus in the court, the mosque, the market-place Omar found himself confronted with enemies more or less avowed, each with his own peculiar reason, real or imagined, for hating him, each deterred only by the fear of his occult powers from seeking his destruction. Yet he was not entirely bereft of the joys of friendship. A small and select band—the choicest spirits of the age—were proud to call him master. The companion of his boyhood Nizam ul Mulk, regarding whom we have quoted from the biographical sketch of his career by Aruzi, and others both in Nishapur and elsewhere fully understood and appreciated his merits, and in their friendship he seems to have found solace for his unpopularity with the multitude.

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At the present time, I regret to say, the name of Omar is no less execrated by the Shi-ite mob in Persia than it was in his own day. The pity is that the cultured classes, who ought to know better, are at no pains to dissipate the existing religious prejudice against one of whose reputation every Persian may well feel proud. They are content themselves to pay him all due deference, gratified by the position his works have won for themselves among the literate of Europe and America. They quote his verses and laud his philosophy to the stranger sojourning in their midst, but they are not concerned to clear his name and fame in the eyes of the mass of their fellow-countrymen. Verily, "a prophet is not without honour save in his own country and among his own people."



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